

A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO  
UNDERSTANDING THE FACTORS INFLUENCING  
DIVORCING PARENTS' READINESS TO CO-PARENT

By

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Abstract: Divorce is a common experience and can have negative outcomes for parents and children. Children of divorce are at higher risk for mental and physical health issues. The strongest predictor of child resiliency post-divorce is how well their parents manage their divorce. Subsequently 46 of the 50 states currently have mandates surrounding co-parenting (i.e., continual involvement of parents post-divorce for the benefit of their child) programs; however, little is known about the specific mechanisms that facilitate a parent's readiness to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. This study used a qualitative design with phenomenological and modified grounded theories in order to understand and create a tentative theory for what affects a parent's readiness to co-parent. Parents reported that an increased ability to recognize what they can control in their co-parenting relationship and the paradigm shift they experience as a parent post-divorce facilitate their readiness to co-parent. Furthermore, parents who attended a co-parenting class reported that the class facilitator's ability to engage the class, the group dynamic of the class, and the content of the co-parenting class facilitated changes in their perceptions about their co-parenting relationship.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The divorce rate in the United States is about nine per 1,000 with 20% of first marriages ending in divorce within five years and 48% divorcing before their 20th anniversary (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). Each year about one million children will experience parental divorce (Haimi & Lerner, 2016; Gaydos, Schweiterman, & Zimmer, 1999) and about 34% of children under the age of 16 will experience parental divorce in the United States (Bumpass & Lu, 2000).

Research suggests that children of divorce exhibit more conduct problems, more emotional problems, obtain lower academic test scores and grades, and have more social problems than those from intact two parent families (Amato, 2014). Children whose parents' divorce also have twice the risk of having a mental health disorder (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993) and are more likely to experience physical health problems than individuals in intact families (Anderson, 2014). Further, parental conflict following divorce predicts the emergence of anxiety and depression in children and the psychological well-being of adult children (Jekielek, 1998; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). Parents access to and management of resources (i.e. finances, family support, education, etc.), ability to communicate effectively post-divorce, and frequency of contact with their children determine how well children adjust to divorce (Amato, 2014; Davis, Sturge,

Cicchetti, & Cummings, 2007). Although, when controlling for the quality of parenting provided and the level of inter parental conflict prior to the divorce little empirical support has demonstrated whether or not positive co-parenting relationships post-divorce are predictive of better adjustment outcomes for children (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, & Braver 2012).

Divorce research has also found that divorce affects adults overall being. In fact, adults who have experienced divorce or separation report greater levels of psychological distress than those of married or never married adults (Hope, Rodgers, & Power 1999; Wade & Cairney, 2000). Divorce is a stressful transition period that has a significant impact on all members of the family (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). The process of divorce can create stress that influences parent's emotional, psychological, physical, behavioral and financial wellbeing for years following the divorce (Amato, 2014). Divorced adults experience higher levels of psychological distress than those who are married and are at an increased risk for mental illness, suicide, addiction, homicide, and physical illness (Amato, 2014; Amato, 2000). Furthermore, divorced parents report higher levels of depression and anxiety than married adults' experience (Amato, 2014). Thus, it is critical to understand how a parent's experience of their divorce impacts their readiness to co-parent, despite the fact that parent's adjustment to divorce is the strongest predictor of child resiliency following divorce (Amato, 2014; Nielsen, 2011; Wang & Amato, 2000).

### **Collaborative Co-Parenting**

Divorce is not a static event but a dynamic and stressful process, which makes adjusting to co-parenting roles difficult. Co-parenting refers to continual involvement



between parents in relation to their children (Hardesty, Khaw, Chung, & Martin, 2008). Due to the negative effects divorce has on children, about half of all the court systems in the United States refer parents to court or community based education programs designed to inform parents about steps they can take to minimize the risk of divorce on children (Amato, 2014). Research has demonstrated that co-parenting classes assist in increasing participant's knowledge on how divorce is influencing their children, how to reduce conflict with their co-parent, and increases divorcing parents sense of hope (Cox & Brosi, under review; LaGraff, Stolz, & Brandon, 2015; Brandon, 2010). Furthermore, Salem, Sandler, and Wolchik (2013) found that parents who participate in co-parenting classes report lower co-parenting conflict, better parent-child relationships, better child wellbeing, and better parent wellbeing. However, research has not explored the specific mechanisms that serve to inhibit or assist in facilitating parents' desire to engage in a healthier co-parenting relationship (LaGraff et al., 2015).

Parents who participate in brief educational divorce classes demonstrate an increased willingness to engage in cooperative parenting (Arbuthnot, Poole, & Gordon, 1996), decrease co-parent conflict, and increase cooperation between co-parents (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; Cookston, Braver, Griffin, De Luse, & Miles, 2006; LaGraff et al., 2015; Owen & Rhoades, 2012). LaGraff et al., (2015) cites that class content which facilitates insight into how parent's management of their divorce affects their children, and the instructor's ability to validate divorcing parent's perception, beliefs, and experiences are connected to decreasing negative interactions between co-parents. However, little is known about the key factors (e.g. divorcer status, custody arrangements, gender, reasons for the divorce) that are most likely to facilitate a

divorcing parent's willingness to improve their co-parenting relationship. Thus, in order increase positive co-parenting behaviors it is important to gain a better understanding of the specific mechanisms within co-parenting classes that are influencing co-parent's relationships and ultimately the subsequent wellbeing of their children.

Using a qualitative design, this study sought to understand the key factors associated with the development of a positive co-parenting relationship and increase the efficacy of a co-parenting program. Specifically, this study will seek to understand how divorcing parent's experiences with and what specific factors within a co-parenting class may influence their readiness to engage in positive co-parenting strategies. Further, modified grounded theory design will be used to help identify how parent's experiences of their divorce and experiences of attending a co-parenting class may be influencing their readiness to engage in healthy co-parenting behaviors.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Constance Ahrons (1995) believed that families who experience divorce have an opportunity to maintain a family bond in order to meet the needs of their children. Ahrons (1995) recommends that parents create clear rules between themselves after divorce to avoid unnecessary conflict and remain involved in their children's lives. This process leads to what Ahrons considers the "good divorce." Despite the positive connotation of the concept, the positive opportunities after a couples' divorce do not make up for the trauma, pain, hurt, and anger that has resulted from the divorce (Amato, Kane, James, 2011). In fact, research suggests that children of a "good divorce" fared worse, in regards to self-esteem, school grades, substance use, and overall life satisfaction, than children whose parents remained in an unhappy, low-conflict marriage (Amato et al., 2011 & Marquardt, 2005). Considering that children's post-divorce adjustment largely depends on how well their parents manage their divorce (Amato, 2014) it is important to provide a framework for understanding parent's process of adjustment to divorce. Thus, in the following review, the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982), Communication Theory (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 2011), and Ambiguous Loss (Boss, 2010) will be used to help organize and understand parents' key divorce

processes, experiences, and factors that may be affecting their motivation to co-parent and ultimately their child's wellbeing.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

The TTM (Prochaska et al., 1982) is an integrative, biopsychosocial model used to conceptualize the process of behavior change. TTM, developed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1982) integrates components of other theories into a comprehensive theory of change that can be applied across a variety of behaviors, populations, and settings. TTM punctuates change as a process that occurs over time in stages. Prochaska and DiClemente (1982) suggests that it is possible that progression through the stages, or change, will occur linearly; however, frequently individuals recycle through the stages of change depending on their self-efficacy or degree of confidence they have in maintaining their desired change (Kolundzija, Gajic, Misic-Pavkov, & Maras 2011).

The TTM provides a framework for understanding how a parent's experience following attendance in a co-parenting class may be influencing their readiness to engage in a co-parenting relationship. In other words, Prochaska & DiClemente (2005) explain how individuals move from a state of relative unawareness (precontemplation) to an awareness of a problem (contemplation), to preparing for action against the problem (preparation), to finally making changes in their parenting behaviors (action). To apply this process to divorcing parents, understanding the factors connected to how a parent's experience of their divorce (e.g. divorcer, divorcee, father, or mother) and experience of attending a co-parenting class will provide a framework for understanding why parents are prepared or reluctant to move from one stage of change to the next.

### **Stages of Change**

In the precontemplation stage, a divorcing parent may have no desire to change their behaviors because they are unaware of the need to change (Prochaska et al., 2005). Parents report decreasing the amount of negative co-parenting behaviors they engaged in when they obtain an awareness of how these behaviors are impacting their children (Lagraff et al., 2015). Thus, a parent's lack of desire to co-parent may be connected to being uninformed or under informed about the consequences their behaviors have on their children. For divorcing parents this process may be affected by their own stress response to the divorce. For example, parents may be feeling overwhelmed by the shock and stress of their divorce, and thus use anger against their co-parent as an ego defense mechanism or as a way to maintain a level of self-control (Spring, 2012). Divorcing parent's expression of anger, maintenance of a survival stance, and lack of awareness of the 'problem' limits their ability to change their behaviors and ultimately their ability to engage in effective co-parenting.

In the contemplation stage (Prochaska et al., 2005), parents have an awareness that how they are managing their divorce is influencing their children, but given the nature of emotional flooding and stress response (Gottman, 2014), they may still be too emotionally reactive to the experience of their divorce to realize the negative effects of their survival stance on their parenting. In this stage, divorcing parent's lack of awareness on how to change their behaviors may be helping to protect themselves from further emotional pain connected to their divorce. Divorcing parents may be ambivalent about making changes in their relationship, because they have insight into what needs to change, but they may not be ready to change their parenting behaviors. Thus, it is

unlikely that positive changes in a co-parenting relationship are able to be implemented during this stage of change.

When a parent enters the preparation stage (Prochaska et al., 2005) they have an awareness of a problem that requires action and begin to develop a plan on how to make changes in their co-parenting relationship and intend to take action, or change their behaviors. In this stage of change, divorcing parents are able to understand how their behaviors may be influencing their children and are able to recognize that how they manage their divorce affects the wellbeing of their children. Divorcing parents increased insight into how their behaviors are affecting their children may help them remove their children from the middle of their divorce (LaGraff et al., 2015) and begin to recognize changes they can make to improve their co-parenting relationship. In essence, divorcing parent's new level of insight helps them be responsive to the circumstances surrounding their divorce instead of being reactive.

Divorcing parent's increased ability to be emotionally responsive to their divorce prepares them to change their behaviors, way of thinking, and environment in order to improve their co-parenting relationship and ultimately the wellbeing of the children. When divorcing parents enter the action stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005) they have made overt modifications in their behaviors (e.g. implementing a shared parenting plan, using a mediator to negotiate differences with a co-parent, decrease behaviors that put a child in the middle of the divorce, and increase consistency in their child's life) within the past six months.

When divorcing parents implement changes in their parenting practices it may increase their ability to maintain changes in their co-parenting relationships when

situations arise that evoke stress (Kolundzija et al., 2001; Prochaska et al., 1982). Thus, the positively changed parenting strategies and behaviors may help divorcing parents enter the maintenance stage of change. When divorcing parents enter the maintenance stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005) they are confident in their ability to maintain positive behavioral changes in the relationship. Prochaska et al., (2005) further highlights that this stage of change can last from 12 months to 5 years in order to gain the self-efficacy necessary to enter the termination stage of change when their new behaviors have become automatic habits. Thus, due to the stressful experience of divorce and the time required to solidify behavioral changes divorcing parents are not ready to enter the maintenance or action stages of change following attendance of a co-parenting class.

### **Theoretical Interventions**

Involved throughout the stages of the TTM is the process of behaviors and experiences that help parents change their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, or relationships. Prochaska et al. (1982) suggested specific techniques to help individuals move from one stage of change to the next. The TTM concepts and techniques center on both intra and interpersonal domains and awareness of both that serve to inhibit as well as facilitate movement from one stage to the next. Researchers have recently integrated these techniques into co-parenting programs (Cox & Brosi, 2016) and aid in providing a framework for understanding how to engage divorcing parents in changing their parent's negative behaviors. Some of the techniques that have been integrated into co-parenting programs include: conscious raising (increasing parent's awareness of how their divorce is impacting their children) environmental reevaluation (assessing the problem in relation to the social context), self-liberation (interventions designed to strengthen parent's belief

that they can change), social liberation (encouraging parents to seek greater social support), counter-conditioning (learning healthy behaviors to replace old behaviors), stimulus control (encouraging one to change their environment to control their triggers), reinforcement management (techniques that reinforce behaviors), and helping relationship (getting support for behavioral change). These techniques outlined by Prochaska et al. (1982) provide intervention based methods that may provide a framework to understand how a divorcing parents experience of attending a co-parenting class is impacting their readiness to engage in a positive co-parenting relationship.

### **Communication Theory and Co-Parenting**

Communication Theory (Watzlawick et al., 2011) also provides a framework for understanding what factors are affecting divorcing parent's readiness to engage in positive co-parenting practices. Watzlawick et al. (2011) views behavior from the premise that all behavior is communication and that communication is an interactive process. This premise leads to looking at interpersonal relationships as patterns of behavior that form and can be changed by redefining relationships through shifts in perception. To this end, changes in communication may shift parent's perception of their divorce and redefine what it means to "win" in divorce, and the actions required to accomplish this task.

Watzlawick et al. (2011) proposed that problems often start when people misinterpret another's communication due to a lack of information or as the result of a pre-existing filter stemming from previous experiences that leads them to understand communication in a way that was not intended. Individuals are often unaware that they are misinterpreting the message that is being sent to them and consequently respond with a



message that does not make sense to the other person. Neither person involved in the communication process may be aware that information was misinterpreted. Therefore, the congruence of the messages being shared between two individuals decreases which may leave individuals in a downward spiral with no knowledge of how to recover.

Divorcing parents are constantly receiving messages about their divorce from their co-parent and everyone with whom they interact. Due to the stress provoking nature of divorce, many divorcing parents experience discordant messages. In other words divorcing parents use maladaptive (Greenberg, 2015) responses to stress as they perceive their co-parent attacking them, and therefore perceive the need to defend themselves. The parent's defensiveness, is likely interpreted as aggression which escalates conflict. Utilizing specific techniques such as a reframe, aids in creating a paradigm shift or change in perception (Watzlawick et al., 2011) which may serve to not only increase awareness of self, but to displace a divorcing parent's anxiety by introducing a new interpretation of the message and thereby allow them to interpret the messages they are receiving from their co-parent in a less defensive manner. Changing how a divorcing parent interprets the messages they receive from their co-parent may increase their ability to respond to their co-parent in a healthier manner that does not place their child in the middle of the divorce. Furthermore, the use of reframes and paradigm shifts, which ultimately are used to change a divorcing parent's perspective, may also increase their willingness to move from earlier stages of change into readiness to engage in positive co-parenting strategies.

### **Factors that Affect the Divorce Process**

The TTM (Prochaska et al., 2005) provides a theoretical basis to understand the process divorcing parents experience as they transition to co-parents while communication theory (Watzlawick et al., 2011) provides a foundation for understanding factors that may inhibit or facilitate divorcing parents readiness to move from one stage of change to the next. However, it is also important to understand how the underlying stress of divorce and traumatic experiences with divorce may be influencing a parent's readiness to engage in positive co-parenting practices.

### **Divorce as a Trauma**

Dreman (1990) indicated that individuals may experience traumatic symptoms after being exposed to overwhelming events that render them helpless in the face of intolerable danger or anxiety. Research has found that due to the intolerable anxiety of divorce, that many divorcing parents report experiencing symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; Dreman, 1990; Wallerstein, Corbin, & Lewis 1988). The PTSD symptoms that divorcing parent's report experiencing include: anxiety, hyper vigilance, catastrophizing, fear of loss of control, helplessness, avoidance of people and/or places, denial, shame, ambivalence, and cognitive distortions (Dreman, 1990; Wallerstein et al., 1988). Furthermore, many divorcing parents experience an identity crisis and report experiencing feelings of loss (Dreman, 1990; Luamann-Billings & Emery, 2000) due to losing a romantic relationship with the associated benefits including emotional support, companionship, regular sexual partners, and economic security (Amato, 2014). Thus, in order to understand the profound impact that divorce has on individual functioning, it is beneficial to view divorce as a trauma with the associated impact of PTSD related symptomology and how this subsequently affects the decision making and survival

stances that many divorcing parents take. Further, understanding divorce as a traumatic event may also provide greater insight into how a parent's experience of their divorce influences their readiness to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors and ability to implement new information presented in a co-parenting class.

### **Ambiguous Loss and Co-Parenting**

The intangibility of many of the losses or changes associated with divorce (e.g. loss of marital relationship, change in parenting relationship, loss of extended family member relationships) may also make parent's post-divorce adjustment more difficult. Boss (2010) presented the theory of ambiguous loss, which may help us further understand the unique experiences of loss that divorcing parents are experiencing. Ambiguous loss are the physical or psychological losses that are intangible or uncertain because they are difficult to identify. Boss (2010) discussed two types of ambiguous loss: when a person is physically absent but psychologically present, and when a person is physically present but psychologically absent. Divorcing parents often experience the first category because former partners are physically absent from their lives but are still having a psychological presence in their daily experiences. Ambiguous loss provides a lens to understand how the grief and loss experience of divorce affects divorcing parent's experiences.

Depending on the custody arrangements, parents may lose the frequent access that they used to have with their children. In this way, both parents may be physically absent, but psychologically present, from their child and co-parent's lives. Lavadera, Caravelli, and Togliatti (2012) found that divorcing parents who have joint physical custody may experience fewer feelings of loss and are less likely to define their lives by their divorce.

Boss (2008) further found that the ambiguity of loss may cause people to feel helpless, experience role confusion in relationships, and experience a lack of rituals or traditions that help them navigate stressful circumstances due to the nature of their ambiguous loss. Thus, parents are forced into the role of co-parent and are forced to adapt to the loss of their spousal, and to some extent, their parental roles. These ambiguous losses provide no clear form of closure as divorcing parents struggle to transition to their new role as a co-parent and struggle to gain a sense of identity as a co-parent. It is therefore important to gain a better understanding of how a parent's experience of their divorce and the ambiguous loss associated with their divorce and role ambiguity may be influencing their readiness to engage in a healthy co-parenting relationship.

### **Father's Divorce Experience**

Understanding divorce from the perspective as a traumatic event and ambiguous loss helps us further understand the unique and changing dynamics divorcing parent's experience that may affect their readiness to engage in a mutual co-parenting relationship. With that, research has shown that fathers and mothers experience divorce differently (Amato, 2014) and that fathers are frequently the noncustodial and/or nonresidential parent (Amato, 2014 & Emery, Sbarra, & Grover, 2005). Consequently, children often experience a decrease in the quality and quantity of contact with their fathers after divorce (Amato, 2014; Amato, 1993; Neilson, 2011; Seltzer, 1991, Umberson & Williams, 1993). In addition to having less frequent contact with their children, fathers often provide less emotional support with their children, have fewer emotional connections with their children, and are generally perceived as poorer parents (Albertini & Garriga, 2011; Booth & Amato, 1994; Neilson, 2011). Non-custodial

parents, frequently fathers, also report greater feelings of loss and are more likely to define their lives through the lens of divorce (Luamann-Billings et al., 2000). Due to fathers having decreased contact with their children following divorce they are often portrayed as a “Disneyland” parent because they tend to participate in recreational activities more often with their children than in daily routines such as helping out with homework (Furstenburg & Nord, 1985; Stewart, 1999). Due to the decreased amount of contact with their children and increased stress in post-divorce parent child relationships some fathers slip away from involvement in their children’s life (Emery et al., 2005). Some father’s also indicate that they believe it will be easier and better for their children if they disengage from their life (Emery et al., 2005).

Research has indicated that noncustodial parental involvement, most frequently fathers, is mediated by proximity to the child, having lived with their child, supporting their child financially, having joint custody, and receiving the support and cooperation for their parental role from their co-parent (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Hoffman, 1995; Stewart, 1999). Factors mediating noncustodial parental, most frequently fathers, involvement is important to understand because children with an involved father in their life experience greater academic success (Chadwick, 2002; Menning, 2006), engage in fewer delinquent behaviors (Coley & Medeiros, 2007), have a more positive self-image (Dunlop, Burns, & Bermingham, 2001), and are less likely to experience depression as an adult (Steward, 2003). Thus, gaining an understanding of how a father’s experience of his divorce (e.g. custodial situation, gatekeeping behaviors, stage of the healing process) influences his readiness to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors and stay involved in his children’s lives is critical.

## **Mother's Divorce Experience**

Mothers are also very important in their children's lives, so it is also important to address how mother's experience of their divorce may affect their readiness to co-parent. Mothers are most often the residential parent (Amato, 2014; Amato, 1993; Kelly, 2007). Due to increased responsibilities (e.g., caring for the children full time) of being the residential parent mothers frequently report a lack of time for self-care (Ahrons, 1995) and tend to stay single parents longer than fathers (Emery et al., 2005). Mothers are also likely to experience a decrease in their standard of living, even when accounting for child support (Emery et al., 2005). These and other factors related to their divorce may result in mothers engaging in gatekeeping behaviors, or behaviors that aim to exclude or restrict a father's involvement with his children following divorce (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Puhlman & Pasley, 2013) or building resentment towards their children's fathers due to his lack of involvement (Stanley, 2014). Custodial parents, or mothers, are ultimately gatekeepers given that they have a larger quantity of time with their children and thus, hold a position of power. This power provides mothers with the ability to determine what access their co-parent has to their children and what information they receive regarding their children. The custodial parent may open or close this gate by supporting or inhibiting the physical, psychological, or emotional relationships with the non-custodial parent (Trinder, 2008) and may do so either unconsciously or deliberately to harm the relationship between a co-parent and their child. Mothers may also hold the perception that they have good reasons for not wanting the father to be involved in their child's life. Except where the children's safety is a concern, research supports that children respond best to divorce when they have access to and a relationship with both of their parents

(Amato, 2014; Nielsen, 2011; Wang et al., 2000). It is therefore critical to gain an increased understanding of what factors may lead a mother to facilitate the father's involvement in their child's life. Furthermore, it is essential to understand how a mother's experience of her divorce influences her readiness to co-parent

### **Divorce Status**

In addition to parenting roles, the initiator status of the divorce, whether a parent is the divorcer or divorcee, influences a parent's experience of their divorce (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). In the United States, wives are more likely to initiate divorce than husbands (Amato & Previti, 2003; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The divorcer has often thought about leaving the marriage, is mentally prepared for the divorce, may have made living and financial preparations, and often experiences feelings of relief and stress following divorce (Amato et al., 2003; Hetherington et al., 2002). However, the divorcer often underestimates how difficult the divorce will be and is caught off guard by their own or their ex-spouse's reactions to the divorce (Amato et al., 2003; Hetherington et al., 2002). Consequently, the divorcer may experience a wide range of emotions related to triggering the divorce process.

The divorcee is often caught off guard or may not have been expecting the divorce. As a result, the divorcee may experience an identity crisis due to the seemingly abrupt decision by the divorcer, and due to the increased stress, have greater difficulty making sound decisions during their adjustment process to the divorce (Ahrons, 1995; Amato et al., 2003). The divorcee, typically being less prepared for the changes associated with divorce, also experiences a wide range of emotions and often becomes fearful, angry, depressed, and resentful (Amato et al., 2003; Hetherington et al., 2002).

The shock and trauma of the loss often leads the divorcee to experience a longer adjustment period following divorce (Luamann-Billings et al., 2000).

### **Protective factors**

The previously discussed factors of parental role, divorcer status, and ambiguous loss influence a parent's experience of their divorce. Research indicates that the strongest predictors of child wellbeing and adjustment post-divorce are parental involvement with their children and how well parents manage their divorce (Nielson, 2011). Thus, it is important to understand protective factors for divorcing parents that may increase parental involvement and positive divorce management. Multiple studies have found that a parent's level of adjustment to divorce is positively associated with the number of resources available to them such as education, employment, and a supportive network of friends and relatives (Booth & Amato, 1991; Kitson, 1992). Additionally, parents who receive help with finances exhibit lower levels of distress than those who do not receive financial assistance (Kitson, 1992). In addition to understanding how divorcing parents perceive their own support in terms of financial and social, it will be beneficial to further understand how co-parenting programs, often being mandated by the courts, may serve as a point of intervention and subsequently serve as a positive influence how parents adjust to their divorce.

### **Co-Parenting Programs**

The growing acknowledgment of the adverse consequences of divorce created a growing need and acceptance of co-parenting education programs that are widespread (Brandon, 2006; Cookston et al., 2006; Pollett & Lombreglia, 2008; Goodman et al., 2004; Sigal et al., 2011). In fact, 46 of the 50 states having either a state wide mandated



or local mandate requiring divorcing parents to attend a co-parenting program (Mulroy et al., 2013). Co-parenting programs are typically between two to four hours in length and focus on increasing parents' recognition of the harm created when they place their child in the middle of their conflict and focus on helping increase parent's understanding of developmentally appropriate responses to their children (McKenry et al. 1999). Due to laws regulating the content of co-parenting programs many programs have added additional areas of focus such as understanding the effects of violence on children and promoting reconciliation as an option (House Bill 2249, 2014).

In general co-parenting programs have an acceptance among the courts and public (Goodman et al., 2004; Salem et al., 2013); however, until recently there has been a lack of empirical evidence of their effectiveness (Salem et al., 2013; Sigal et al., 2011). Most research studies assess for knowledge gained among parents, although few have utilized more rigorous evaluation methods such as a longitudinal design to examine change in behaviors (Cookston et al., 2006; Goodman et al., 2004; McKenry et al., 1999). Given that co-parenting education courses are often court-mandated, it is important that scrupulous assessments of such courses be established and tested in order to establish efficacy and effectiveness of the numerous existing programs.

Recent longitudinal research by LaGraff et al. (2015) used self-report surveys to assess for parent's post-divorce knowledge increase following participation in a four hour co-parenting program (e.g. impact of divorce on children, impact of triangulation on children, and strategies to reduce conflict with one's co-parent) and behaviors changes (e.g. conflict management and keeping children out of the middle of conflict). After a two month follow-up survey, LaGraff et al. (2015) found that parents reported less conflict

with their co-parent and less frequent engagement in behaviors that placed children in the middle of conflict. Additionally, Brandon (2006) found that parents who participated in a three to nine month follow-up of a co-parenting program showed a significant decrease in nine out of 10 measured behaviors related to putting children in the middle of parental conflict (i.e. sending messages through the children, talking to others about the other parent when angry, insulting the other parent in front of the child, asking the child about the other parent, asking the child to take sides, arguing, complaining, yelling, or fighting in front of the children). Although, the data from both these studies is based on self-report information, they suggest that short-term behavioral change (i.e. decreasing negative parenting behaviors) is possible through attendance in a co-parenting program.

Cookston and Fung (2011) used a retrospective pre/posttest design to assess the effectiveness of a co-parenting program and found significant improvements in inter-parental conflict, parental alienation behaviors, and how often arguments occurred between parents, after parents completed the six sessions of the program. These findings may suggest that participants of this program were adequately prepared to understand how parental behaviors and conflict affect child's adjustment post-divorce and adequately implemented strategies to affect positive co-parenting strategies. However, consistent with many other program evaluations, due to the lack of an extensive follow-up evaluation component and the retrospective self-report nature of the findings, the investigation lacks the ability to demonstrate behavioral changes over time.

In a qualitative study of a parenting program participants were contacted for follow up evaluations in order to better understand how the program impacted divorced parents' knowledge gains (Dworkin & Karahan, 2005). In this study Dworkin et al.

(2005) coded parents reports and found the following themes in regards to how a co-parenting class impacted parents comprehension of positive co-parenting practices; after attending the parenting program parents had a better understanding of how their divorce was impacting themselves and their children, gained an increased awareness of the benefits of mediation, and better understood the guidelines surrounding child custody and child support. Participants also reported that they experienced logistical difficulties attending the class due to transportation issues and the time the class was offered. Participants also noted unique program delivery factor in that they provided mixed reports on the program facilitator's ability to teach the program (Dworkin et al., 2005).

Fagan and Kaufman (2015) interviewed 71 fathers and used a qualitative research design to better understand factors related to low-income, unmarried, nonresidential fathers engagement in co-parenting with their child's mother. Through the coding the interviews Fagan et al. (2015) discovered unique content and process-related themes related to co-parenting. Specifically, they found that co-parenting relationships between nonresidential mothers/fathers often involve another adult who is frequently a dating partner and co-parenting relationships involving low income partners are multidimensional and include both positive and negative parenting behaviors (e.g. undermining, gatekeeping, parenting alliance, conflict, support, and division of labor). These findings demonstrate the dynamic factors that may inhibit a divorcing parent's willingness to engage in effective co-parenting strategies. However, because the interviews were limited to low-income fathers, these themes may only be applicable to fathers who have attended similar parenting programs.

Few research studies have conducted follow up evaluations three or more months after parents have attended a co-parenting program and those that have mainly looked at the satisfaction of participants with the program (e.g., Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996). Most of studies that conduct follow-up assessments administer surveys over the phone and focus on elements of satisfaction with the program rather than utilize measures to assess behavioral change. It is also important to note the lack of qualitative data in this area that has explored how a co-parents experience of their divorce and experience of attending a co-parenting class may influence positive changes in co-parenting relationships. The few qualitative studies available have investigated the impact of using technology to facilitate co-parent communication, co-parenting in unmarried relationships, and how to increase father's involvement (Cowen, Cowen, Pruett, & Pruett, 2007; Fang et al., 2015; Ganong, Coleman, Feistman, Jamison, & Markham, 2012; Sano, Richards, & Zvonkovic, 2008). This dearth of qualitative research leaves substantial room for a more in-depth understanding of unique perspectives and experiences of divorcing parents and the subsequent effect on co-parenting. Specifically, future research should explore divorcing parent's unique experiences following attendance in co-parenting programs in order to understand what factors may be associated with an increased willingness to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. Furthermore, future research should attempt to parcel out the specific mechanisms within co-parenting programs that may be associated with positive behavioral changes (e.g., parenting practices, increased positive parent communication).

## **Summary**

Co-parenting programs are becoming increasingly important and research within the divorce and co-parenting body of literature provides preliminary support for the effectiveness of co-parenting programs in creating change for families experiencing divorce. The research suggests tenuous relationships surrounding variables, as well as the possible impact these variables can have on the success of co-parenting programs as indicated by the improvement of the co-parenting relationship, reduction of inter-parental conflict, and the improved psychosocial well-being in children of divorce. Furthermore, the specific factors connected to parent's motivation to co-parent are particularly understudied. Qualitative data in this area is especially limited and could illuminate the unique factors associated with positive co-parenting and the barriers that may be preventing parent's engagement in positive co-parenting relationships. It is therefore the aim of the current study to strengthen and, ideally, extend the literature on how a parent's experience of their divorce impacts their readiness to engage in a co-parenting relationship. Furthermore, this study aims to develop a tentative theory on how divorcing parent's experience of their divorce and experience of attending a co-parenting class impacts their readiness to engage in a positive co-parenting relationship. Thus, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How does a parent's experience of their divorce (e.g. reasons for the divorce, stress responses, divorcer, divorcee, father, mother, custodial parent, non-custodial parent) affect their readiness to engage (e.g., movement from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change) in a co-parenting relationship?

2. How does a parent's experience of attending a co-parenting class affect his/her movement from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change and motivation to engage in the process of co-parenting?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research methodology that was used to examine how a parent's experience of their divorce and experience of attending a co-parenting class impacts their readiness to change and engage in a co-parenting relationship. The sections in this chapter describe the study's participants, recruitment procedures, theoretical design, instrumentation, and data collection and analysis procedures.

#### **Design of the Study**

A qualitative research design was used and guided by modified grounded theory and phenomenology theory as a basis for the understanding and interpretation of data. The current qualitative study will examine how parent's experiences of their divorce and experiences of attending a co-parenting class impact their readiness to engage in a positive co-parenting relationship. Qualitative methodology will be used because it is ideal for capturing the experiences and perceptions of respondents (Berg-Weger, Rubio, & Tebb, 2001). This qualitative study is important because it will also provide a framework for understanding how a co-parent's experience of their divorce impacts their readiness to engage in healthy co-parenting behaviors. Thus, a modified grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) approach, which is a method that develops a theory from systematically gathering and analyzing data, using constant comparative

analysis (i.e., process of moving in and out of data collection and analysis process in order to begin to develop a tentative theory to inform the data collection) will be used to provide an understanding of how parents' divorce experiences influences their readiness to engage in a positive co-parenting relationship. The grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2008 & Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was further used to create a tentative theory of how a parent's experience of their divorce and experience of attending a co-parenting class are influencing their readiness to engage in a co-parenting relationship. Furthermore, modified grounded theory methods are appropriate for research questions that are process oriented (Rafuls & Moon, 1996).

Phenomenological theory (Colaizzi, 1978), which studies conscious experience from the first person point of view and seeks to understand people's perceptions of a situation, was used to understand and make meaning of divorcing parent's experiences. Thus, phenomenological theory helped identify how parent's perceptions of their divorce and experience of attending a co-parenting class create meaning and thereby may affect their readiness to engage in a co-parenting relationship. The phenomenological oriented questions, which are broad and open ended, was also used to create meaning (Jankowski & Ivy, 2001) and further understand how parents make sense of their unique divorce experiences and how these subsequently may be affecting parent's contemplation regarding their readiness to engage in positive co-parenting practices.

## **Participants**

Data for this research study was collected from February to June 2016 and is part of a larger research study aimed at understanding how a co-parenting program can decrease the negative impact that divorce has on children. After completing a co-



parenting class participants from this study completed an informed consent to be contacted for follow up research. Approval from the OSU institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained to recruit these participants to complete qualitative interviews. Participants were recruited from a convenient sample of divorcing parents from two Oklahoma counties, both rural and urban. In each county, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Services (OCES) provides a Co-Parenting for Resilience program to court-mandated participants. Upon completion of the class, participants were provided with an informed consent to be contacted for future research. Participants who completed the informed consent were contacted by telephone four to seven months after completing the class. For inclusion in the study, initial phone calls verified that participants speak English, are divorced or in the process of getting divorced, and are the biological parent of at least one minor child. Participants who met criterion and were willing to participate completed an informed consent that included permission to use their data. Care was taken to ensure that respondents are selected proportionally to ensure that gender and rural/urban perspectives are represented in the data.

### **Pre-Treatment**

Participants engaged in two distinct data collection opportunities. Prior to completing the class (at program registration), the OCES county educators collected Time-1 survey data before treatment (attendance of co-parenting class). The data collected pre-treatment included demographic information (e.g. details regarding temporary custody and reasons for divorce) and perception of parenting behaviors.

### **Treatment**

Individuals participated in a four-hour co-parenting class called *Co-Parenting for Resilience* (CPR; Cox & Brosi 2016). The CPR class is designed to minimize the negative impacts of divorce on children through helping parents better manage their divorce process. The goal of the CPR course is to increase positive parenting practices and interactions by helping parents understand how to work together for the betterment of their children. This course is based upon techniques from the TTM (Prochaska et al., 2005), Brief Strategic Family Therapy (Baker & Darnell, 2006), and incorporated theoretical components from motivational interviewing (MI) (Miller & Rollnick, 2012), and Dynamic Systems Theory (Thelen, 2005). The course was designed to help parents move from a pre-contemplative stage, in which parents lack awareness of how their actions influence their children, to a change stage, in which parents take responsibility for their behaviors and are committed to change their parenting behaviors.

Brief Strategic Therapy techniques reframe problems as failed attempts at solutions in order to re-establish structure and stability in the family system (Barker et al., 2006). Viewing problems as failed attempts at solutions helps parents to explore how they can change their behaviors while minimizing the feeling of judgment. The curriculum utilizes videos and vignettes that help parents learn from others examples and apply class material to real life scenarios. MI is used to highlight change talk and any intentionality as reframes and class activities are used to displace divorcing parent's anxiety and increase their readiness to engage in co-parenting. Finally, parents are invited to move from the preparation stage to the change stage through committing to apply the skills they have learned in the class.

### **Post-Treatment**

Following the class participants are asked to complete a time 2 survey and are provided with an informed consent in which they are asked permission to use their information as part of a research study and to be contacted for the opportunity to participate in a future co-parenting research. The consenting participants from two Oklahoma counties, constituted the sampling frame from which 100 participants will be selected randomly using a proportional allocation procedure to ensure that an equal number of participants are selected from each county for inclusion in the study. Four attempts were made to contact consented participants before they were considered no longer willing to participate in the study. The data collected from this process analyzed parent's behaviors four to six months after participating in the co-parenting class.

## **Procedures**

### **Qualitative Procedures**

Following the time 3 data collection the principal investigator, (PI) received IRB approval to complete in-person interviews from 20 program participants that were randomly selected from two Oklahoma counties. Proportional allocation was used to ensure that the sample size, of fathers and mothers, was representative of the population. Following receipt of informed consent (see Appendix A), participants were interviewed one-on-one in a private location convenient to the participant (e.g. library, public buildings, home). Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol lasting approximately 30-60 minutes. Open-ended questions were used to understand how participants experienced their divorce, co-parenting relationship, and the CPR class has impacted their motivation to co-parent (see Appendix B for interview guide).

The PI of this study contacted and conducted all interviews with participants. Part of the author's education consisted of training in and understanding of qualitative interviewing with specific training in the general interview guide approach (Turner, 2010). This approach ensures that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee while allowing a degree of freedom, adaptability, and researcher reflexivity (Koch & Harrington, 1998) to obtain information from the participant. Reflexivity (Koch et al., 1998) is an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step during the research process. This acknowledges that the researcher's background will affect the research while also allowing the data to speak for itself.

The researcher was the sole interviewer in order to control for interviewees' conversational behaviors based on the effects of interviewers individual differences. Interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder with the interviews being transcribed verbatim. Recordings and transcriptions were kept under lock and key. In order to protect participant confidentiality, participants self-selected a pseudonym to be used throughout the interview and only one researcher served as a contact person for the participants. Participants were informed of these procedures and were provided with informed consent before participating in qualitative interviews.

### **Plan of Analysis**

#### **Adhering to Design**

This qualitative research study aimed to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon of co-parenting through the framework of the TTM, while remaining true to the facts presented in the data (Prochaska et al., 2005). As this is a qualitative analysis of

narrative data, methods of analysis are necessarily different from quantitative methods of research. Guided by a process of qualitative analysis outlined by Creswell (2007), the author along with three other analysts comprised the research team that examined and interpreted the interviews. Multiple analysts were included in the coding process for the purpose of triangulation of data in order to ensure reliable results are consistent with data to create a holistic perspective through utilizing multiple perspectives. The plan of analyses followed the following four distinct phases as explained by Creswell (2007) and Turner (1981):

**Phase 1.** Analysts began initial coding through searching all of the interviews, attaching labels to lines or paragraphs of the data, and then met to discuss the overall picture of what participants were reporting in the interviews.

**Phase 2.** Analysts then independently read through the transcripts at least one more time highlighting and extracting recurring themes that emerge from the data. Analysts then independently created a summary describing the emerging themes at a concrete level that he or she extracted from the transcripts. The research team then met and shared their individual summaries with the group. Analysts then reached a consensus regarding the major themes that emerged from the data. In order for consensus to be obtained themes were proposed and supported by referencing specific material from the transcripts.

**Phase 3:** Once consensus is achieved on the major themes each analyst will work individually to clarify these themes. Through this process themes were elaborated, refined, and then recorded with individual summaries. Analysts then read the transcripts again extracting subthemes that were present in the interviews.

**Phase 4:** Analysts met once again to attain a consensus of the subthemes within the interviews. Each analyst presented subthemes that they interpreted from the data. Through this process the major themes and subthemes of the data were identified, refined, and clarified. This process of triangulation enhanced the consistency of the findings of this research.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis and coding methodology of the interview transcripts outlined by Creswell (2007) were conducted using the coding methods from grounded theory for its ability to analyze data on a micro level and produce descriptions of both process and experience (LaRossa, 2005). This specific data analysis process involves two phases of open and axial coding or the disaggregation of core themes that emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2008). Initially, open coding was conducted to develop categories that emerged from the transcripts. According to Creswell (2007), open coding is an analytic process that identifies concepts and discovers the properties and dimensions of the concepts in them. The development of categories will be guided by in vivo codes, which will be identified through participants' language (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Strauss et al., (1990) described in vivo codes as terms that catch the attention of the coder. Open coding techniques thus was applied by labeling significant statements with descriptors that capture the concepts they describe. Data saturation was achieved when no new categories emerge from the data.

**Validity and credibility.** The coders on the project consisted of four analysts with varying educational experiences and demographic characteristics. Specifically, all three are Caucasian, with three males and one female, two are married, none are

divorced, none are children of divorce, and all are college students (one undergraduate, two master's level, and one doctoral) between the ages of 22 to 28 years of age. While acknowledging researcher reflexivity (Koch et al., 1998), emphasis was given to allow the data to speak for itself through constant comparison (Strauss et al., 1990) in order to allow codes to emerge naturally. In keeping with recommendations by Creswell (2007), steps were taken to ensure credibility and rigor. To protect the validity of findings from this research, the PI had members of the research team code the data and discuss initial findings and interpretations of transcripts with the research team. This team worked through consensus to refine the themes that emerge from the data. As suggested by Strauss et al. (1990), memos were kept which allowed the author to write down developing ideas, definitions, and reflections, which were studied by the author as well as the research team, further increasing the validity of the results.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The sample consisted of 113 possible participants for the study from which 36 declined to participate in an interview, 43 were unable to be contacted, 16 initially agreed to participate in an interview but failed to do so, and 13 parents participated in the study. The project had an 11% participant response rate of parents who had consented to participate in follow up research after attendance of a co-parenting class. Demographic information of the participants was collected which included gender, ethnicity, social economic status, education level, custody arraignments, and who filed for the divorce. Of the 13 participants in this study 38% were male and 62% were female with 77% being Caucasian, 8% Latino, 8% Native American, and 8% did not provide their ethnicity. The sample consisted of participants from urban (61%) and rural (39%) areas. The participants self-reported monthly income range from the following: \$0 to \$2,000 (31%), \$2,000 to \$4,000 (46%), \$4,000 or more (8%), and 15% did not provide this information. The following is the participant's highest level of education completed: high school (38%), some college or tech school (30%), college degree (23%), and 8% did not provide this information. Participants reported on their current custody arrangements, which consisted of 69% joint custody, 15% sole custody, 8% visitation only, and 8% reported having reconciled with their partner. Participants also reported on who filed for divorce with 53% initiating the divorce.



The findings of this study consisted of a consensus of themes and subthemes extracted from the transcribed interviews by the research team. All of the themes and subthemes represent a consensus of at least three of the four analysts. The bulk of the consensus building work across the analysts centered on the refinement of major themes and the articulation of subthemes. These findings were organized as a way of illuminating the processes of meaning making amongst the co-parents regarding their experience of their divorce and as a way to create a tentative theory explaining key factors connected with divorcing parent's readiness to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors (e.g., movement from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change; Prochaska, et al., 2005).

Parents discussed the aspects of their divorce experience that facilitated or inhibited their readiness to co-parent (e.g., ability to manage conflict, ability to regulate emotions, level of support system, and paradigm shift in regards to their importance as a parent) and how their attendance of a co-parenting class normalized their divorce experience and provided them with the support necessary to move from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005). Table 1 below presents each of the emergent themes represented in the data.

Table 1				
<i>Major themes and Subthemes Descriptions</i>				
Theme present with this number of participants	Major Theme	Description of major theme	Subthemes	Description of Subtheme
10	Taking responsibility (RQ1)	Parent's ability to recognize things they can and cannot control facilitated changes in their communication behaviors and helped parents work towards creating a positive co-parenting relationship.	Emotional regulation (4) and intentional communication with co-parent (5). *Receiving counseling services (2) and divorcer more ready to co-parent.	Co-parents expressed the importance of effective communication with their co-parent; Co-parents discussed how having a support system (i.e. family or friends) increased their ability to manage the barriers of co-parenting.
9	Identity realization (RQ1)	Parents experience a paradigm shift about their importance in their children's lives. Subsequently, parents became more intentional with their parenting behaviors and developed an identity in the new co-parenting role which facilitated positive parenting behaviors.	Increased intentionality of parental involvement (4), promoting child's relationship with other parent, and increased belief about worth as a parent (6).	Parents become intentional about spending time with their children and report the divorce has reinforced their belief that they are important as a parent.

13	Facilitator impact (RQ2)	Facilitator characteristics (i.e. ability to reframe and normalize participant experiences) promoted class engagement and parent's change in perceptions about their co-parenting relationship. This seemingly facilitated participant's movement from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change.	Ability to engage class participants and effectively use class material (12), poor facilitator involvement lead to participant disengagement from the class (3), differences between presenters (2).	The facilitator's ability to engage participants without invalidating their divorce experience increased their willingness to learn. Facilitator's ability to engage the class influenced participant's perspectives changing as a result of the curriculum videos.
13	Group setting (RQ2)	The group setting of the class normalized the participants experience and increased their ability to self-reflect (i.e. move from pre-contemplation to contemplation) through learning from other parents situations.	*Modeling of good and negative parenting behaviors (2).	Participants reported that seeing other co-parents attend the class together increased their hope of being able to co-parent. Participants also reported that through seeing other parent's negative co-parenting behaviors in the class increased their desire to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors to avoid being "that parent".
13	Management of anxiety in the class (RQ2)	The content of the class increased participant's ability to self-reflect on how their parenting behaviors are affecting their relationship with their child and their child's wellbeing.	Statistics addressing the impact of divorce on children (5), class activities (3), and real life examples (3).	The use of statistics, class activities, and vignettes increased parent's ability to see the divorce from their child's perspective and move from pre-contemplation to contemplation.

7	Class resources and materials (RQ2)	Providing parents with additional resources served as parent's support system after the class as it provided them with tools to help them change their behaviors.	Book (3), resource materials or co-parenting emails (4).	Parent's perspective on what resources are important varied. However, parents specifically mentioned the book, handouts and emails as resources that helped them navigate stressful co-parenting situations.
7	Use of videos (RQ2)	The use of videos in the co-parenting class increased parent's ability to see their child's perspective of the divorce and motivated parents to remove their children from the middle of their divorce.	Facilitator differences	Three of the five parents who had a negative experience with the class facilitator reported that the videos were not impactful for them.

It is important to note that data saturation was not achieved for RQ1. Thus, no emergent theme explained how divorcing parents' reasons for their divorce, stress response associated with their divorce, divorcer status, gender, or legal custody situation affected their readiness to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. Future research should certainly focus on these specific areas in order to deepen our understanding of these factors. However, the two emergent themes, noted in table 1, do increase our understanding of factors associated with divorcing parents' ability to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors.

### **Responsibility Taking**

The first major emergent theme, responsibility taking, addresses RQ1. Ten of the 13 participants reported that their divorce experience forced them to take responsibility and recognize things that they can and cannot control in their co-parenting relationship.

Parents indicated that their divorce forced them think about what was important in their life and this process resulted in parents reporting that they are making changes in their communication behaviors in order to engage in a positive co-parenting relationship. In essence, parents reported that engaging in responsibility taking behaviors increased their readiness to co-parent.

### **Perspective Taking**

One method parents reported that allowed them to take responsibility for their behaviors was deliberately changing their communication patterns with their co-parent. Parents stated that “swallowing yours words” or “not responding right away” helped prevent arguments and improved their co-parenting relationship. The following is one parent’s report of how improving communication with their co-parent helped them remove their child from the middle of the divorce:

...the better that we can communicate...sharing what works and what does not work as far as discipline and things like that, I think makes it easier for us as parents, but also easier on the children. It also creates some consistency. I think that is our goal right now is to be [consistent]...remembering that it is about the kids and stepping back in every situation...looking at things from their [the children’s] perspective changed our relationship.

This parent’s statement demonstrates that parents’ ability to recognize things they can and cannot control, through communicating with their co-parent, allowed them to remember it is about the children and thereby take a step back and respond differently to their co-parent. Another parent reported the following in regards to how improved communication facilitated their readiness to co-parent:

Amicably communicating...some of the things that...would have previously annoyed each other a lot or would have turned into arguments would just really don't...I think it is a matter of retaking perspective and knowing what it important.

This parent's reflection also provides support for the importance of perspective taking in a co-parenting relationship. This is akin to Prochaska et al., (2005) stages of change because when parents are able to "retake perspective" of what is important in their relationship it allows them to move from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change. Parent's readiness to co-parent or move from one stage of change to the next, is influenced by their ability take responsibility for things they can control such as communication with their co-parent.

It is also important to note that the three participants who did not report a change in responsibility taking behaviors during their divorce were all female. Furthermore, two indicated that they were the divorcee. Thus, because the divorcer is further along in the healing process of divorce (Amato, 2014) and the stress evoking nature of divorce (Dreman, 1990) divorcers may be more prepared to take responsibility for changing their behaviors post-divorce. Thus, the divorcee may have a more difficult time engaging in responsibility taking behaviors, particularly if they are the mother due to the fact the mothers are most frequently the residential parent (Amato, 2014) and consequently have less time to engage in self-care behaviors than the non-residential parent.

### **Emotional Regulation**

Another subtheme of responsibility taking was parents' ability to regulate their emotions. Four participants reported that being able to regulate their emotions increased their readiness to co-parent. Specifically one parent stated the following:

[I] take a day or a few hours or whatever to think about and process things and kind of remove yourself from the situation, because it is hard. If it is a situation where it does not have to have an answer right away, it always works better to table it and come back to it when I am ready.

This parent's excerpt represents their ability to step away from a situation and "come back to it when I am ready" and indicates they are able to engage in emotion regulating behaviors during stress evoking situations. This parent was able to self-regulate and not become as Gottman (2004) would describe as emotionally flooded. Another parent stated the following in regards to how their ability to work through and regulate their emotions affected their co-parenting relationship:

Part of it had to do with me getting over myself and forgiving. Um, so whenever I would want to get angry I would make a conscious decision to control that and there were things that I felt legitimately angry about.

Thus, this parent's ability to regulate their emotions and forgive their co-parent allowed them to make a conscious decision to regulate their emotions and respond differently to their co-parent. The excerpts provided in this subtheme represent parent's reports that their ability to regulate their emotions through taking a time out, "does not have to have an answer right away", and making "a conscious decision" to control their emotions, such as anger, increased their readiness to co-parent.

Another method parents reported that helped them control their emotions was having an adequate support system (e.g. family and friends) available to help them cope with the difficulties of their divorce. One parent specifically stated, “I am lucky that I have a support group...friends and family that you can talk to and get different perceptions from...that is helpful to me.” Another parent stated “social support helps me cope with the difficulties (of their divorce).” These excerpts indicate that divorcing parents’ support system helps them cope with their emotions and thereby change their emotional responses.

Two parents reported that attending counseling increased their readiness to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. These reports did not provide the data saturation necessary for a theme in the data; however, it is important to note that counseling may play a significant role for many parents as one parent reported that her counseling helped her recognize things she can and cannot control such as “if he comes [to a child’s activity], he comes. It is his choice”. Attending counseling may also be representative of parent’s support system previously discussed.

It is also important to note that two of the parents reported that they were not ready to confront their emotions until after their divorce was finalized. One parent specifically stated that things would go “in one ear and out the other because I was in the midst of my divorce proceedings” and she reported that her motivation to co-parent tripled after her divorce was finalized. The other parent reported the following when asked what increased her willingness to co-parent:

The closure of the divorce itself. It was a draining process...I felt like I was losing a lot and it wasn’t my fault. As far as co-parenting I didn’t feel like he deserved



any of that. I really think the closure [divorce being finalized] of it and me maturing and getting out of my emotions, getting out of bad headspace. I was able to see the bigger picture.

Although these two parents' reports are insufficient for data saturation and a subsequent theme, they do suggest that some parents may not be able to regulate their emotions or are ready to co-parent until after their divorce is finalized. This may be connected to the increased time sensitive and immediacy of the stress evoking (Dreman, 1990) nature of divorce. Furthermore, some parents may not be able to regulate their emotions due to the traumatic symptoms, hypervigilance, catastrophizing, helplessness, denial, ambivalence, (Dreman, 1990) many parents exhibit following divorce. Thus, more data is needed to determine in order to obtain data saturation and ascertain what factors of divorce (i.e. divorcer status, gender, custody situation, reasons for the divorce) affect parents' inability to regulate their emotions prior to the divorce being finalized.

### **Intentional Communication**

Another subtheme that emerged related to parent's ability to take responsibility during their divorce is that parents became intentional about how and what they communicate to their co-parent. Specifically, five parents reported that they became intentional about how they communicated with their co-parent. One parent reported that developing a "written [parenting] plan...improved communication because everybody [co-parent] knows the expectations." Another parent indicated that having a set time to talk about co-parenting details and keeping his responses short improved his communication with his co-parent. The following is an excerpt from this parent representing the above statement:

...she sends me seven paragraphs and I say okay and then she sends six paragraphs and I say sounds good, then she sends eight paragraphs [laughs]...you know I just have to have stuff jotted down, instead of whining about it, because whenever she calls I forget to say what I wanted to say and that means I have to call her back again.

Having a plan address when to communicate with a co-parent and what to discuss with them increased their ability to avoid conflict with their co-parent. Parents also reported that their ability to be intentional about how they communicate with their co-parent improved as they recognized things they can and cannot control about their divorce. This dynamic of intentional communication is captured in the following parent's statement:

...I have to be patient with her [co-parent] and understand who she is. Part of the reasons we have issues as co-parents are the reasons we got divorced...So you have to understand that...it is not my job to change her and it is not her job to change me...we just need to worry about our son.

This parent's ability to let go of the things he could not control, "it is not my job to change her", helped him remove his child from the middle of the divorce. Furthermore, as parents are able to take responsibility for things they can and cannot control in a co-parenting relationship increases their readiness to co-parent.

### **Identity Realization**

Identity realization is another major theme that emerged and is related to RQ1. Nine of the 13 parents interviewed reported that the experience of their divorce (e.g. divorcer, divorcee, father, mother, reasons for the divorce, and stress response) positively and/or negatively challenged their perceptions about their identity as a parent. Four of the

13 parents interviewed reported that they were intentional about being involved in their child's life post-divorce. It is important to note that three of the four parents who reported increased intentional involvement with their child were male. Additionally, six parents reported their divorce increased their belief that their specific role as a father or a mother is important to the well-being of their children.

In essence shifting from the role of a parent to a co-parent resulted in a paradigm shift, as parents became more aware of their importance and worth as a parent. Parents also reported that this paradigm shift increased their ability to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. One parent stated that his divorce made him realize that "I have to do everything I possibly can to make sure that my son knows I love him. That is it!" while another parent reported that "I have to be that sure factor in her [child's] life". These statements reflect parents' reports of intentional involvement with their children post-divorce and are further supported by the following parents report:

...[the divorce] makes me stop and think about how much time I am spending with her [my child]. I still see myself as an effective father, even when we are not together. I am trying to be a good role model in hopes that she does not become one of the statistics. She knows she can depend on me.

The above statement from a parent is representative of the concept of being intentionally involved in their child's life post-divorce. Parent's increased involvement with their kids also helped them reestablish their identity as co-parents and families. This is represented in the following quote from a parent when asked how their divorce affected their beliefs about their importance as a parent:

It is good actually that I am strong enough to work and provide for them and we have done lots of activities [together] I think that it has been good. In some ways in can be really stressful because there is no one to give you a break and there is no other option, but other times it has been really good to make incredible memories together...it has been neat to figure out our little cohesive unit.

The above parent's statement "that I am strong enough to work and provide for them" is representative of the paradigm shift that many co-parents experience post-divorce as they adapt to the role of co-parent. Parents began thinking about their role as a parent differently and in some cases increased their involvement in their children's lives. One parent reported that his increased involvement was due to his experience with his parents divorcing. He stated, "I have to be a part of my son's life. I cannot let what happened to me happen to my son." The paradigm shift parents reported experiencing regarding how they view themselves as a parent enhanced parent's desire to become more involved in their child's life.

### **Facilitator Impact**

#### **Positive facilitator experience**

The remaining emergent themes from the data directly address RQ2, in regards to how a parent's attendance at a co-parenting class facilitates their movement from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005). All of the 13 parents in the study reported that the co-parenting class facilitator's depth of knowledge, ability to engage the class in discussion, utilize examples, and validate their perceptions affected their ability to change their perspectives about their co-parenting relationship.

Eight of the participants reported that they had a positive experience with the class facilitator. When answering the question regarding what aspect of the class changed

how they were thinking about their co-parenting relationship, one parent stated, “the interaction with the person teaching the class”. When discussing the role of the facilitator another parent reported that the facilitator was “super personable...they [the facilitator] seemed like...they cared about what they were doing...they were not just going through the motions so I appreciated that”. While a different parent reported the following:

...the girls teaching were so young that it makes you want to listen more...it drives you to listen more than [if] someone just sits and lectures and lectures...the girls interacted, they asked questions, we did worksheets, it was a good class. I would recommend this parenting class to anybody.

All 13 of the parents interviewed indicated that the class was beneficial to them and eight reported that their interaction with the class facilitator and the manner by which the facilitator delivered the material and conveyed care for the participants affected their perceptions changing about their co-parenting relationship.

### **Difference between facilitators**

The importance of the class facilitator is further supported by two parents reports that they had two class facilitators and that the facilitator’s abilities to teach the class differed. One parent stated:

...really only one of them [facilitators] I thought was any good. One I thought was just going through the motions and just going through the material. Not a good public speaker, not energetic, not really interacting with the group sitting around the table. It was like I have a time line, I have material I have to cover, and I want this presentation to go away. That was probably the worst part of the class....The better speaker came later in the presentation. So about the time I was

thinking I am just going through the motions, then all the sudden it was like we hit a higher gear. Now we are going to talk about this material. We have a new energetic speaker who is actually going to talk to us and bring us into the conversation. It is not a lecture anymore, it is a conversation. That helped a lot.

Another participant indicated a skill level difference between the presenters by stating the following: “One of our presenters was probably...better than the other...I understand that they are...learning how to do things...it seemed more natural for that person”. These two experts indicate that the facilitator affects the effectiveness of the class and how parents believe they were affected.

### **Negative Facilitator Experience**

The impact of the facilitator on parent’s ability to perspective take in the class is further support by the emergent subtheme represented by three parent’s reports of having a negative experience with the facilitator teaching the class. One of these parents stated they wanted, “more examples of what we [the facilitator is] are talking about...I think that would be helpful for me, like what does this look like”. Another parent indicated that the facilitator was “late” and stated “there wasn’t many of us [class participants] but the ones that were there...were zoned out”. While the third participant stated the following about the class facilitators’ response to a question:

...her response seemed as though, I just remember thinking she has never been in my shoes and she really can’t tell me how to feel or how to operate....I remember thinking it is easy for someone to say this...but I don’t feel the same way....That is when I started reading the book...I zoned out a little bit. I remember thinking she can’t help me...

These parent's statements further solidified the emergent theme that the facilitator's ability to teach the class directly affects the effectiveness of the class. It is important to note that the co-parenting class was mandated for parents to complete prior to their divorce being finalized. Thus, some parents may not have been open to learning due to being forced to attend the class. Furthermore, the effectiveness of specific curriculum content, that was identified as a major theme and will be addressed later, may have been connected with the facilitator's ability to implement the course material.

Though not all participants reported having mixed experiences with their course facilitator, all 13 parents reported that class facilitator was an important part of the class and reported that the class helped change their perspective about their co-parenting relationship. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that the class facilitator's ability to teach the class is a key factor influencing parents' movement from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005) as a result of attending the class.

### **Group Setting**

Another major theme that emerged was that all 13 participants reported that being in a group setting was beneficial in changing their perspective of their co-parenting relationships. All of the interviewed parents indicated that hearing other parent's experiences normalized their own divorce experience. One parent reported that hearing other parents' experiences "made me feel better about my situation...it made me feel like our relationship is a lot easier than that relationship" while another stated "we are actually better than some of them [divorcing parents] that was there; I basically remember thinking...I am glad mine is not that bad." These statements represent parent's reports

that seeing negative examples from others increased their readiness to co-parent because they did not want to become the negative parent present in the class.

Parents also reported that they were able to relate with other parent's experiences in the class and indicated listening to their experiences helped them apply concepts taught in the class. The following parent indicated this in the following statement:

...there was a gentleman that was dealing with a co-parent that was also not very involved and she was on drugs. I could relate to him because it was you know kind of my story of not having a willing participant to co-parent.

For this parent hearing another divorcing parent's story normalized their experience and provided them with validation from someone they were able to relate with and feel supported by in the class.

Additionally parents reported that hearing negative examples from other class participants increased their thoughts about how to change their relationship:

...other participants in the class were extremely bitter. In a couple cases the kids seemed to be a weapon they could use against their co-parent. I said, I don't want to get there, that is not where I want to put my daughter, forget my own character, I don't want to put my daughter in that. I could see some of these other people in the class and it was easy to identify that okay, the difference between them and me is not that great. They are not horrible people and I am not some saint...

This statement indicates that the group setting may help displace parent's anxiety and increase their ability to self-reflect and take responsibility for their own actions. The importance of the group setting and the class facilitator are major emergent themes that



increases divorcing parent's movement from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005).

### **Management of Anxiety**

In connection with the facilitator of the class and the importance of the group setting the content of the class seemingly increased divorcing parent's ability to self-reflect on their parenting behaviors and relationship with their child. All 13 participants reported specific mechanisms from the class (i.e. statistics, class activities, examples, the facilitator, and videos) that increased parents' ability to change their perspective of their co-parenting relationship. As presented earlier, the effect of the facilitator and the videos were significant enough to be include as major themes on their own. However, the specific mechanism within the class that led to a change in parents' perception differed depending on the parent.

### **Use of Statistics**

Five of the parents stated the statistics used in the class, describing the impact that divorce has on children, changed their perception of their parenting behaviors. In essence, the statistics provided parents with a reality check in regards to how their divorce could be affecting their children. One parent stated:

...when we did the training all the statistics about what happens to teenagers from split homes scared me to death. I've really got to do what's best for her [my child] because I don't want her to be a statistic. Another parent stated:

... I didn't want her to be this statistic of her not having a relationship with her dad...that's one of the things that made me want to say her, you know, I don't want this to happen because it could happen. So that's when I was like, okay...I

will have to eat some of my words or, you know, don't let my pride get in the way or whatever because I don't want this to happen.

The included excerpts indicate that informing parents on how their divorce is influencing their children may increase their ability to self-reflect, as they are see their divorce from different perspectives. Parents' self-reflection connected with their ability to take different perspectives increases their ability to discern what they may bring to the co-parenting process and thereby move to the contemplation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005).

### **Class Activities**

Another subtheme of the management of anxiety was the use of class activities to help parents think about their co-parenting behaviors differently. One parent discussed how a class activity of selecting an adjective that they want to describe their child in the future influenced them significantly. This parent stated:

Like how do you want to describe your child and how do you want to get there and changing your mindset... You do not realize some of the stuff that you are doing could be potentially harming your child.

Another parent reported that when completing a class activity, which was designed to help parents understand emotional reactivity, their perspective of their co-parenting relationship changed as "not fighting in front of the kids" became a priority. Another parent stated that "hearing real life examples" (e.g. hearing other people share their experiences of their divorce and co-parenting experiences) made the class more meaningful and helped them to apply the content. The commonality of these themes is that the use of class activities increased parent's ability to see the divorce from their

child's perspective and thereby understand how their behaviors are influencing their children. Parents' increased insight into their behaviors seemingly helped them address their emotions and begin thinking differently about their co-parenting behaviors, subsequently helping them move from the pre-contemplation to the contemplation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005).

### **Curriculum use of Videos**

The use of curriculum videos, that were designed to increase parents' anxiety through demonstrating how their co-parenting behaviors are affecting their children, could be included under the management of anxiety theme; however, six of the 13 parents interviewed reported that the videos shown in the co-parenting class changed their perspectives about their co-parenting situation. Thus, the use of videos in a co-parenting curriculum were an emergent theme and seemingly had a larger impact for many parents than other course materials. This is congruent with the suggestion made by LaGraff et al., (2015), that the use of videos, although no explanation of video content was provided, in a co-parenting class may be connected with changes in parents' perceptions about their co-parenting relationship.

The use of videos in the co-parenting class associated with this study increased parents' ability to see things from their child's perspective and motivated parents to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. One parent specifically stated: "The video we watched was motivating...seeing things from my child's perspective and making sure that is not how my kids are seeing things" [changed my perception]. The following statement is another parent's report of how watching the videos changed their perspective of co-parenting:

...the one that sticks out the most to me is the screaming at each other...I was just sitting in my seat going...I don't like this at all, because that is where I was...so those affected me a lot...videos with the signs...that was a little heart breaking...I was like oh crap I don't want my kids to be the same, I want my kids to grow and be like it was all good. They were friends; you know we still have to have a unified front.

Another parent discussed how the videos increased their ability to self-reflect on how their divorce was influencing their child as evidenced by their following statement:

There was a few videos...[the] impact is probably more significant than I was originally giving credit for when I look at the kids in those videos and I see my kid, I don't want her holding up one of those signs so it had an impact. It became clear to me through both the videos, there was some great examples of the yelling, the screaming, the fighting in front of the kids, all that was just, you know not to do, but it is easy still to slip up and it could happen.

These excerpts indicate that the use of videos within co-parenting programs is an effective tool that displaces parents' anxiety about their divorce and increases their ability to see things from their child's perspective. These parents' perspective of their co-parenting relationship changed, as a result of the videos shown in the class, which helped parents recognize that they can co-parent more effectively. Thus, the inclusion of videos appears to be an effective medium to help parents move from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005).

It is important to note an emergent subtheme that of the 13 participants, seven specifically indicated that the videos shown in the class changed their perceptions about

their co-parenting relationship. Three of the six participants who indicated the movies were not beneficial in changing their perspective of their co-parenting relationship also reported that they had a negative experience with the class facilitator. Thus, the facilitator's ability to connect with class participants and appropriately implement the curriculum videos maybe connected to their effectiveness.

### **Class Resources and Materials**

As part of the co-parenting program, participants are provided several resources pertaining to the divorce process and co-parenting (i.e., divorce and co-parenting survival book, fact sheets, monthly newsletters on co-parenting for up to 12 months following attendance of their class). Seven out of the 13 participants reported that the take home resources and materials gave them the additional support and confidence they needed to co-parent. Specifically, parents reported that the book provided in the class and the resource materials and/or monthly emails with co-parenting tips provided them with the additional support they needed to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. One participant stated, "Knowing the information was right there in front of me or would be coming in an email that was the part I really liked". Another participant when discussing the class materials stated that "I've got the information and things that can help us...so I think that was my "extra motivation [to co-parent]". It was also mentioned that the resources were "reassuring...having a reminder" of how to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. While another participant specifically mentioned the resources served as their "written support group" after the class:

...the book that I took home...I read that and I really did enjoy that. Having that there to um, to reference is a good thing, you feel like no one else will understand, it was like my written support group.

Providing parents with the resource material after the class seemingly provided them with the confidence needed to plan how to make changes in their co-parenting relationship. These experts provide information indicating the resource material serves as a “written support group” and may increase divorcing parent’s ability to plan how and begin to make changes in the co-parenting relationship. Thus, the resources provided to parents after the class, may serve as an ongoing mechanism to help divorcing parents move from the contemplation to preparation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005). In essence, the resource packet provided at the class and monthly email reminders provided parents with a tool to help them think about and plan to make changes in their co-parenting relationship.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

#### **Discussion**

The results of this research study highlight how factors from a parent's divorce and attendance of a co-parenting program influence their readiness to engage in a positive co-parenting relationship. The data collected indicates that parent's experience of divorce varies greatly; however, the data clearly depicted two key factors of a parent's divorce experience that impact their readiness to co-parent: 1) the ability to take responsibility for their behaviors 2) paradigm shift in regards to their perceived importance as a father or mother. Additionally, the data included five strong emergent themes explaining how attending a co-parenting class affects a parent's ability to move from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change as described by the TTM (Prochaska et al., 2005). These emergent themes include: 1) the class facilitators influence on the effectiveness of the class 2) effect the group setting has on participants 3) the use of class material to manage parent's anxiety 4) the use of videos in the class 5) providing resource material for parents to take home. Through a TTM lens it is clear the factors from a parent's divorce and attendance of a co-parenting program influence their readiness to move from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change and engage in positive co-parenting behaviors.

As divorcing parents struggle to make sense of their experiences and manage their emotions, they inevitably will engage in behaviors that will either facilitate or hinder collaborative co-parenting. Thus, the way in which parents manage the multitude of potentially deleterious aspects of their divorce will dictate the new homeostasis created. In other words, parent's behaviors post-divorce will establish patterns of interaction and determine how they respond when under stress in order to maintain a stable condition.

Significant findings in this study are categorized by RQ1 and RQ2. The major themes for RQ1 highlight parent's reports of being able to take responsibility for things they can control. Parents indicated that understanding things they can control allowed them to let go of things outside of their control. Parents' increased insight into their co-parenting behaviors seemingly changed their perception of their co-parenting relationship which allowed them to intentionally change how they communicated with their co-parent. The behavioral changes associated with intentional communication (e.g. waiting to respond, taking a time out, willingness to have difficult conversations) appeared to increase parents' ability to regulate their emotions and respond differently to their co-parent. This is congruent with previous findings that emotional regulation is an important factor in effective parenting (Gaunt, 2008; Hauser, 2012).

The additional theme for RQ1 focused on the paradigm shift that occurs as parents reestablish an identity as a parent after divorce. This theme is consistent with the research on divorce as a trauma (Dreman, 1990; Wallerstein et al., 1988); specifically that people who divorce experience symptoms similar to PTSD. The themes in this study support these findings as evidenced by participants who reported that they were unable to regulate their emotions or take responsibility for their behaviors until after their divorce was finalized. These parents may have been experiencing symptoms of shock and as Luamann-Billings et al., (2000) highlights,



may have experienced difficulties making clear decisions. The process of emotional flooding (Gottman, 2004) clouds divorcing parents' judgment, interferes with clear decision-making, and affects parents' ability to communicate effectively with their co-parent. Thus, co-parenting programs would benefit greatly by including material centered on the validation of the unique emotional experiences of the divorcer and divorcee and methods to regulate their emotions.

The emergent themes categorized under RQ2 indicate that the class facilitator, group dynamics, and class content all interact and may facilitate divorcing parent's movement from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005). Prochaska et al., (2005) suggests that individuals in the pre-contemplation stage of change lack an awareness of the need to change their behaviors. Thus, in order for individuals to move from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change they need to gain an increased awareness of their need to change their behaviors (Prochaska et al., 2005). In this study, parents also reported that the use of videos, vignettes, and group dynamics displaced their anxiety and allowed them to think about how their divorce was affecting their children.

The purposeful use of anxiety within the co-parenting classes may be associated with parents reported changes in their perception changing about their co-parenting relationship and parenting behaviors. This is reflected in the theory of fear-arousing communication (Hoog & Stroebe, 2007) which suggests that fear arousal may enhance the motivation to avert a perceived threat, but is dependent on people's outcome expectations regarding the recommendations (what will happen if I follow the recommendations?) and their self-efficacy (how confident am I that I can follow the recommendation?). In other words, increasing parent's anxiety in a co-parenting class may enhance their readiness to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. This is also fitting with movement from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change (Prochaska

et al., 2005) as parents increased awareness of how their divorce was affecting their children increased their ability to confront their own emotions and recognize that changes in their co-parenting relationship need to occur.

Parents also reported that their perceptions of their co-parenting relationship changed. Consequently, parents indicated that they intentionally changed how they communicated with their co-parent and increased their involvement in their children's lives. Specifically, following attendance of the co-parenting class parents reported that they had made plans on how to change their parenting behaviors (i.e., preparation stage of change; Prochaska et al., 2005) and reported that they implemented behavioral changes (i.e., communication strategies with co-parent) which indicates movement toward to the action stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005). Thus, parents' attendance of a co-parenting class may be associated subsequent engagement in positive co-parenting behaviors.

### **Clinical Implications**

The results of this study have significant clinical implications and, with the application of modified grounded theory (Charmaz 2008) have been used to create a tentative theory for how a parent's experience of their divorce (reasons for the divorce, stress levels, divorcer status, father, and mother) affect their readiness to co-parent. Parents reported that their ability to understand what they can and cannot control about their divorce and their co-parent is a freeing experience. This realization allows parents to confront and begin to let go of their negative emotions associated with their divorce and progress through the healing process. Parent's ability to take responsibility and subsequent ability to effectively co-parent may also be connected to their reported ability to regulate their emotions and intentionally communicate with their co-parent for their child's benefit. It is unclear however, whether this process is mediated by their place in the

healing process resulting from separation or contact with their children.

Parents reported ability to regulate their emotions and tolerate anxiety is fitting with Bowen's (1985) concept of differentiation. Differentiation can be thought of as a parent's ability to keep their emotional balance while interacting with others. In other words, it is a parent's ability to hold onto themselves and not cutoff from or become emotionally fused with another individual (Bowen, 1985). It may also increase a parent's ability to regulate their emotions in order to avoid emotional flooding (Gottman, 2004). Thus, parent's ability to maintain emotional balance, regardless of whether they are the divorcer or divorcee, facilitates parents' readiness to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. This finding is supported by previous research that parents' ability to regulate their emotions is associated with positive parenting behaviors (Gaunt, 2008; Hauser, 2012; Kelly, 2000). Consequently, whenever co-parenting programs fail to address emotional regulation and fail to validate parents who may still be experiencing strong emotions associated with their divorce (e.g. bitterness, resentment, anger) the effectiveness of the class may be limited to parents who are further along in the healing process.

Additionally, conceptualizing parents' divorce experience through the lens of trauma (Dreman, 1990) and ambiguous loss (Boss, 2010) provides additional understanding for the importance of emotional regulation for divorcing parents. Parents are often grieving the loss of their prior marriage and changed relationship with their children. Thus, divorcing parents who are able to stay emotionally attuned to their own individual unique needs and work through their emotional difficulties without becoming defined by them seemingly have an increased ability to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. Thus, a divorcing parent's readiness to move from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change (Prochaska, 2005) is influenced by their ability to regulate their emotions and intentionally communicate with their partner. Increased

intentional communication behaviors by parents resulted as they became aware of their need to improve their co-parenting relationship. This theory is akin to, and perhaps an application of Bowen's (1985) theory of differentiation to divorcing parents. Divorcing parents often experience gridlock (Bowen, 1985) due to fusion in their relationship that carries over into the separation, when their desires and behaviors override and often block their co-parent's desires or behaviors from occurring. Thus, the ideal interaction involves a divorcing parent's ability to self-regulate which allows them to remain calm and not over react to their co-parents behaviors. When parents are comfortable with and understand their role as a parent it allows for them to experience meaningful endurance (Schnarch & Regas, 2012) as they are able to tolerate discomfort in their co-parenting relationship in order to benefit their child. Bowen's (1985) theory of differentiation can be used to inform future research on the factors that may correlate with or predict divorcing parent's ability to take responsibility for their part in the interpersonal co-parenting process following divorce.

### **Identity Realization**

The prevalent theme of identity realization post-divorce may indicate that parents experience a type of identity crisis following divorce. This concept is fitting with Boss' (2010) theory of ambiguous loss because parents are grieving or at least adjusting to the dissolution of their marriage and altered relationships with their children. Due to the stress evoking nature of divorce (Wallerstein et al., 1988) and potential for divorcing parents to develop trauma like symptoms such as anxiety, hypervigilance, and difficulty making sound decisions (Luamann-Billings et al., 2000) many parents may experience difficulties establishing a new identity post-divorce. The stress evoking nature of divorce and the subsequent change in family dynamics seemingly challenge beliefs about their role as parents. Amato (2014) found that divorcees have

already begun to grieve and adjust to the dissolution of their relationship prior to the divorce and therefore are better prepared to cope with the stress of the divorce. This is congruent with the findings of this study that divorcers are more prepared to adjust to and establish a new identity post-divorce.

The theme of identity realization highlights the paradigm shift that occurs for parents post-divorce and the importance of understanding how fathers and mothers establish their identity following divorce. In this study, parents viewed their roles as a father or mother as important to their child's wellbeing. Subsequently parents also reported that increased their engagement with their children and intentionally worked with their co-parent for the wellbeing of their child. Due to the plethora of research, indicating that children are more resilient when they are able to love and be loved by both of their parents (Amato, 2014) it is essential to understand factors that facilitate positive identity develop for fathers and mothers post-divorce. An increased understanding of parents' shift in identity development following divorce may further help us further understand the unique factors influencing parent's readiness to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors.

The TTM (Prochaska et al., 2005) is a biopsychosocial model that primarily focuses on behavior changes; although, it may also be used to further understand the intrapersonal factors connected to divorcing parent's identity development. In essence, the factors that facilitate a parents' movement from one stage of change to the next may also be associated with divorcing parents' development of beliefs about their new roles as parents. Thus, helping divorcing parents develop a positive identity and recognize their worth as a parent post-divorce may prevent gatekeeping and disengaging behaviors by both parents. The emergent theme of identity development through the divorce process may be a critical element to understand factors that

facilitate parents transitioning into a healthy co-parenting relationship. Thus, future research should look to develop a model operationalizing factors leading to positive identity development and subsequent parental involvement post-divorce.

### **Facilitator Impact**

The emergent themes in this study are also valuable for the development and implementation of co-parenting programs. All 13 participants reported that the class facilitator and group experience were fundamental in their perspective about their co-parenting relationship changing. This indicates that the class facilitator's ability to teach the class, effectively use change agents such as reframes, normalization, paradigm shifts, and facilitate class discussion, may have a great impact on the effectiveness of the class. This theme is analogous to the common factors research (Sprenkle & Blow, 2007) that suggests that a positive therapeutic alliance, or positive therapist and client relationship, is the strongest predictor of positive therapy outcomes. Thus, the class facilitators' ability to develop a positive relationship with a diverse group of class participants and successfully implement the course curriculum may serve as an interaction effect with the actual class content. In other words, the facilitator skills level and the class content are both uniquely important in changing parent's perspectives of their co-parenting relationship. This also supports an emergent theme from this study that having social support was key for some parents in helping them regulate their emotions during the divorce process. Additionally, parents reported that attending counseling served as a form of social support, which may also suggest that co-parenting class facilitators can provide a form of social support to parents as well.

Also important to note is that the class facilitators' ability to develop a positive relationship with parents may be associated with parent's willingness to listen and learn in the

class, which may increase their absorption and retention of course materials leading to an increased readiness to or potential willingness to consider improving their co-parenting relationship. Parents' increased awareness of the need to improve their co-parenting relationship helps them move from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005).

It is imperative that co-parenting programs create a rigorous training program for class facilitators to enhance the program fidelity and effectiveness. It will be important for the training programs to focus on ensuring class facilitators have a solid understanding of how theory is integrated into co-parenting programs. In other words, class facilitators will need to have a solid understanding of how the course curriculum is designed to move parents from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005) and understand how to facilitate movement between Prochaska et al., (2005) stages of change. In order to provide class facilitators with the skills necessary to create shifts in parents perspectives about their co-parenting relationships they will need to have an in depth understanding of how to use skills such as motivational interviewing (Miller et al., 2013), reframing, normalizing, and creating paradigm shifts. Further, due to major theme that the videos serve as a mechanism within the class to change parent's perceptions about their co-parenting relationship, it is important to provide class facilitators with specific training on how to introduce curriculum videos and facilitate class discussion related to the videos.

### **Group Setting**

This research also demonstrated that the group setting of a co-parenting class is highly effective in normalizing parents' experiences and assists in changing parent's perspectives about their co-parenting relationship. After hearing and observing other parents in the co-parenting

class, participants reported an increased motivation to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. Parents indicated that this was due to wanting to avoid the negative behaviors they perceived other parents were engaging in or from other parents modeling the ability to have a positive co-parenting relationship. Thus, the group experience seemingly, increased parents' ability to self-reflect and recognize the need to change their parenting behaviors. Parents' increased insight about the need to change aided in their movement from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005).

In viewing divorce through a trauma lens (Dreman, 1990) the group setting may also serve as a safe location for parents to story and process their divorce or at least internally make sense of their divorce experience. This process may be therapeutic for parents, when their experiences are normalized and validated. Thus, for some parents, a co-parenting class may be similar to storying a trauma narrative (Briere & Scott, 2015) in that they are able to work through their negative emotions and beliefs associated with their divorce. In essence, parents were able to shift their perspective from being a victim of divorce to a co-parent as other class participants modeled negative or positive co-parenting behaviors.

Parents' reflective experiences with others in the co-parenting class are also likened to social learning theory (Bandura, 1969) which suggests that learning occurs through observation or direct instruction. Parents reported that observing other parents in the class motivated them to change because they did not want to be the negative parent in the class (e.g. "I do not want to be that parent") or because they observed other parents modeling how to co-parent in the class (e.g. "if they can co-parent then I can too"). Thus, the social interaction and modeling of co-parenting behaviors by class participants may be connected to parents paradigm shift in how they perceive their co-parenting relationship.



Due to the personal nature of divorce and the stress and potential trauma evoking reactions from parents, it is essential that program facilitators receive adequate training on how to validate and normalize participants' experiences while also balancing the need to maintain the role of facilitator and not group therapist. Additionally, it is important that class facilitators understand their own biases, values, and experiences related to divorce or trauma and receive the necessary support for any unresolved trauma or stress evoking situations in their life.

### **Class Resource Materials**

Parents reported that the resource materials they received from attending a co-parenting class served as a "written support group" for them following the class. Parents reported that the resource materials provided "support" as they transitioned and healed from the divorce. Furthermore, parents stated that the resource materials provided references for them as thought about and attempted to implement changes in their co-parenting relationship. This is akin to movement from the contemplation to preparation stage of change (Prochaska et al., 2005) as parents reported having an awareness of a problem that requires action and began developing a plan on how to make changes in their co-parenting relationship. Furthermore, parents utilization of these resources indicate a movement into the action stage of change (e.g. writing a parenting plan, using I-message, mediation, etc.). Therefore, providing parents with resource materials during the class may facilitate continual change for some parents after the class.

It is important for co-parenting programs to ensure they are providing accurate and sufficient resources to class participants. Participants of this study further indicated they would like more resources and reported that they would be willing to attend a follow-up co-parenting class if offered. Co-parenting programs may thus look to focus on developing additional resources to address the unique aspects of divorce and transitioning to new roles for parents as

well as offering a potential follow up co-parenting class that addresses continued challenges associated with co-parenting and the formation of new relationships (e.g., dating, remarriage, and stepfamily dynamics).

### **Curriculum Videos**

Parents reported that the use of videos in a co-parenting class changed their perspective of their co-parenting relationship. The use of the videos seemingly displaced the parent's anxiety and increased their ability to self-reflect on their co-parenting behaviors. Due to the ambiguous loss (Boss, 2010) and stress response of divorce, many parents experience difficulties making stable decisions following divorce (Dreman, 1990). In other words, parents may still be grieving the loss of their previous relationships (e.g., prior romantic relationship and changed relationships with children, family, and friends) and therefore may have difficulty self-reflecting. Utilizing externalization and displacement techniques may increase one's ability to self-reflect, take perspective, and begin to take responsibility for their current behaviors (Epston & White, 1990). Thus, the use of externalization and displacement of divorcing parents' anxiety, through the use of videos, served as an important mechanism to increase parents' ability to self-reflect and recognize the need to change their parenting behaviors (e.g., movement from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage of change; Prochaska et al., 2005). This is further supported by Brief Strategic Family Theory (Barker, 2006) which denotes that problem behaviors are failed attempts towards solutions. In essence, when parents were able to see the consequences of their problematic behaviors through the videos within the program, it increased their ability to self-reflect on their own actions within their co-parenting relationship. This seemingly helped parents' shift from the perspective of being a victim of divorce to the perspective of being a co-parent.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations for this study related to the identified research questions and research design as well as sampling bias. First, although there may be commonalities concerning the reasons for marital dissolution, each parent's experience of divorce is unique due to differences in: availability of social and financial support, custody situations, length of marriage and/or separation prior to divorce, ages of the children, involvement of extended family, and the potential for blending new families together. Thus, a qualitative analysis of parents' divorce experience may be insufficient to measure the potential themes associated with divorcing parent's experience of their divorce and readiness to engage in positive co-parenting behaviors. Thus, data saturation was not fully reached, which would be necessary to draw clear conclusions or themes to fully address RQ1.

The study may have encountered a sampling bias that affected the validity of the findings and ability to generalize to the larger population of divorcing parents. Specifically, 40 dollars compensation was provided for the interview, which may not have been enough of remuneration for high-income parents to participate. However, none of the participants reported that the financial compensation motivated them to complete the interview. Furthermore, participants indicated that they participated in the interview because the class changed their perspective of their co-parenting relationship and they wanted to share their experiences. Thus, it is possible that parent's participation in the interview was part of their healing process from their divorce.

Participants who completed the study may have been highly motivated to co-parent or at least motivated to discuss their experience as only 13 of the 70 contacted participants agreed to and actually completed the qualitative interview. Thus, these parents may have had more positive experiences of attending a co-parenting class than who did not complete the interview or may

have felt empowered by telling their experiences which may have influenced the findings. Additionally, proportional allocation measures were used to account for SES, gender, and rural/urban representation; however, the majority of the participants were lower SES, 62% were female, and 61% were from urban areas. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable to higher SES groups or fully representative of rural populations.

### **Future Research**

Future research should utilize a mix methods approach, through utilizing the qualitative information from this study to inform which quantitative scales may be useful in measuring parent's behavioral changes. Quantitative scales measuring gatekeeping and father involvement as outlined by Fagan et al., (2003) and scales measuring emotional regulation would aid in controlling for child and co-parenting outcomes for divorcing parents. Furthermore, due to the self-report nature of this study and previous research (Brandon, 2006; Cookston et al., 2011; Dworkin et al., 2005; Fagan et al., 2015; LaGraff et al., 2015) it may be beneficial to use observational measures of parenting behaviors and child outcomes in order to assess for actual behavioral changes. Additionally, previous studies (Brandon, 2006; Cookston et al., 2011; Dworking et al., 2005; Fagan et al., 2015; LaGraff et al., 2015) have used retrospective analysis analyzing one parent's reports of behavioral changes. Thus, dyadic analysis comparing divorcing parent's self-report data may provide further clarity on changes occurring in co-parenting relationships post-divorce. This would provide increased empirical evidence as to what specific behavioral changes parents are making and how this may be affecting child outcomes post-divorce. It would also further inform intervention development for divorcing parents.

Furthermore, this study identified the unique shift in the role that parents self-identify with during separation. However, as this data was collected at just one time during the post-

separation and in some cases, post-divorce process, it is unclear what specific factors have either facilitated or prevented movement through this reformulated identity process. Thus, researchers may look to develop an identity development model for parents post-divorce in order to provide a framework for understanding what factors promote identity realization for parents post-divorce as well as what factors influence negative co-parenting such as parental gatekeeping or what factors lead to parental disengagement.

In regards to co-parenting programs, future research should also look to measure differences within and between co-parenting programs and program facilitators. This can be used to increase our understanding on how a class facilitator impacts program effectiveness and thereby improve training programs for facilitators. Additionally, this research can be used to identify the key agents within a co-parenting program that may increase the effectiveness of co-parenting programs.

Future research in this area should also focus on either gaining a larger more diverse sample of parents with a range of custody, parenting time, etc. or acquiring a sampling of parents that have experienced divorce centering specifically on one demographic of divorcing parent (e.g., custodial fathers who filed for divorce, non-custodial mothers who did not file for divorce). This latter sampling method would help create a clearer picture of the distinct experiences of one group of divorcing parents and aid in parceling out the differences and similarities between the samples co-parenting experiences. In addition, researchers should consider controlling for the amount of parental involvement from each parent prior to the divorce. This is an area worth exploring in order to better understand the shifts and changes that occur post-divorce. This may also help clarify the factors associated with parent identity development post-

divorce. Future research may also want to explore potential associations between the stress responses of divorce and the potential impact it has on identity post-divorce.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Interview Questions

*We have a few questions to help us learn more about how people respond to our co-parenting for Resilience Class—what was helpful, not helpful, and where we may need to make some change in the class. Your responses are neither right nor wrong. We only ask that you be fully honest. The more honest you are, the more we will be able to learn how to help others who take the class. Remember that this interview is voluntary and you don't have to answer anything that will make you feel uncomfortable. During this interview the word co-parent or co-parenting will often be used. These terms refer to working together with your child's other parent to benefit your child. Are you ready to begin?*

#### **RQ 1: Parents Experience of Divorce**

Tell me a little about what your current co-parenting relationship is like... did you or your co-parent initiate the divorce? What is the current custody situation with your kids? Has this changed during the divorce process?

- On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being a lot, how motivated are you to engage in or improve your co-parenting relationship? Tell me more about that...
  - What would be different if you were at a...(Encourage child's relationship with other parent, keeping your co-parent informed about your child). Tell me more about that.
  - What are the biggest barriers or challenges to working with your co-parent? (Recurring dynamics/problems between the two of you; conflict, etc.).
    - What's it like to have them involved in your kids' life? Is this a good/bad thing?
    - What can you do to change this process?
  - What is it that you find *yourself* struggling with the most when it comes to your own willingness to co-parent?
    - What can be done different to change this?
    - How do you cope with this process?
- How has the divorce influenced your beliefs about your worth or importance as a father or mother? (i.e. It is better if I'm not involved in my kids life, my kids don't need me, etc...) Tell me more about that.

- How has this influenced your relationship with your children? (i.e. You stay engaged no matter what; It's easier to disengage than be an involved parent.)

## **RQ 2: Parent's experience of attending class**

On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being a lot, how motivated were you to work with your co-parent after taking the co-parenting class? Tell me more about that...

- Is this different from before you took the class? If so, how did the class impact your perspective of your co-parenting relationship?
- At what point in the class did you find your perspective changing?
  - What factors helped you make your shift in perception? (from class, in your divorce/co-parenting situation, etc.)
- What changes to your co-parenting relationship, if any, did you find yourself wanting to make after taking the class? (working with a mediator, having a co-parenting plan, decreasing conflict, etc...)
- What factors from the class (activities, lecture material, videos, educator, etc...) influenced this motivation? Tell me more about that...How did they influence your motivation?
- What conversations, if any, have you have you had with your co-parent about the co-parenting class? What was discussed in these conversations? How did this impact your co-parenting relationship?
- Besides the content of the class what else did you like or dislike about the class? (i.e. class facilitator, length, time of day, location the class was offered at).
  - How did this impact your experience in taking the co-parenting class? How might this have impacted your co-parenting relationship?
- What was your experience like being in a group setting with other people who are going through similar experiences to your own?
  - What was helpful or not helpful about this?
- If a follow up class was offered to co-parents one year after the class how likely would you be to attend the class?
  - What type of information would you want the class to focus on?
  - Would you prefer to receive one on one instruction or be in a group class? Why?
- Did you read any of the take home tip sheets/hand-outs?
  - Did you find this information beneficial? If so, how?
  - Did this information affect your motivation to co-parent? Why/why not?
- Final question, what motivated you or why did you choose to participate in this interview?

*The following information will be used to connect your responses in this survey to the responses you provided before, immediately after, and 9-12 months after the class. This*

*will help us evaluate how the class is helping parents reach their goals without having to use your name.*

What are the first three letters of your first name as it appears on your birth certificate?

What is your birthday?

What are the first three letters of your co-parent's first name as it appears on his or her birth certificate?

What is your co-parents birthday?

*Thank you for your time, the information you have provided will be very helpful in our efforts to improve the program.*

## Appendix B

### INFORMED CONSENT



## The Co-Parenting for Resilience Study Informed Consent (Interview)

Oklahoma State University

#### PURPOSE:

This study will help us understand how to better support parents and children who are experiencing divorce. Children experiencing their parent's divorce are at greater risk for mental and physical illness, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, and doing poorly in school. Much of what causes these problems is how parents manage their divorce. We are asking you to participate because you completed the court mandated co- parenting class and we are interested in your experiences with co- parenting and what impact if any the co- parenting class has had on your experiences.

#### WHAT WE ARE ASKING YOU TO DO:

For this study you will be asked to respond to some questions about your experiences with co-parenting and experience in the *Co-parenting for Resilience* class in regards to how the class affected your views on co- parenting and your relationship with your co-parent. The interview will take about 30-60 minutes to complete and you will receive \$40 for your participation.

#### RISKS AND BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:

There are no known risks associated with this research project greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. You may feel sad, frustrated or angry thinking about things that have happened in your life. If you think that you need help managing your feelings, we will be happy to help you find other resources such as a counselor.

You participation may also make you feel satisfied and hopeful because you are helping to find solutions to a problem that many children and their parents' experience. Also, just by answering the questions, you may gain some insight about what you could do differently to help both yourself and your child adjust to the divorce.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY:



After you complete this interview, it will be transcribed within two weeks and the audiotape will be destroyed. The information from this interview will be matched with the time 1 (before attending the class) and time 2 (immediately following the class) surveys you completed for the co-parenting class. The use of a unique code will be used to match this information in order to maintain your anonymity. Once your information from the interview, time 1 and time 2 surveys have been matched the unique code will be deleted from your transcript. Your name will not be kept or attached to the transcript in any way. Because you are not providing your name, there are no foreseen risks to maintaining confidentiality. All the research records from this study will be kept private. Tapes will be stored under lock and key in the office of Dr. Matt Brosi until they are transcribed, after which time they will be erased. Any written results will discuss group findings and will not include information that will identify you or your child. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers and individuals responsible for research oversight will have access to the records.

**YOUR RIGHTS:**

Your confidentiality will be protected to the full extent of the law. If you have any concerns, questions, or comments about this research project, you may contact Dr. Matt Brosi at 405-744-3633 or [matt.brosi@okstate.edu](mailto:matt.brosi@okstate.edu). If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant you may contact Dr. Hugh Crethar IRB Chair, at 223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74074, 405-744-5700 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu)

If you agree to participate please provide your signature below:

I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily to give Dr. Brosi and his research team permission to use my responses in their research study.

Signature of Participant

Date

A copy of this form will be provided to you for your records upon request.

2.24.16  
2.23.17  
HE-16.5

## VITA

Kyle Roger Barth

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE FACTORS  
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